

STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE  
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**TESTIMONY FROM THE OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE  
TO THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE, MARCH 1, 2023**

**RAISED BILL NO. 1095, AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS –  
SUPPORT**

Good morning Chairman Currey and Chairman McCrory, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and other members of the Education Committees. This testimony is being submitted on behalf of the Office of the Child Advocate (“OCA”), an independent state oversight agency. The obligations of the OCA are to review, investigate, and make recommendations regarding how our publicly funded state and local systems meet the needs of vulnerable children.

This bill requires three things: (1) that the memorandum of understanding between boards of education and local law enforcement should be centrally maintained, posted on the school website, and posted in the school where the school resource officer is assigned and (2) that the memorandum of understanding include a school resource officer’s duties concerning, and procedures for, the restraint of students, use of firearms and school-based arrests and (3) that individuals who are school counselors, social workers, psychologists, aides and other staff members and have appropriate training and ongoing supports may be assigned the duties of a school resource officer.

OCA supports efforts to ensure clarity regarding the role of school resource officers. Use of law enforcement does not increase the likelihood of a child and their caregiver becoming well connected to needed supports.<sup>1</sup> Ample research shows that early involvement with the justice system is strongly correlated to student arrest, student disengagement with school and dropping out. As stated in the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Division (SAMHSA) *National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care*:

In many communities across the United States, the absence of sufficient and well-integrated mental health crisis care has made local law enforcement the de facto mental health mobile crisis system. This is unacceptable and unsafe...<sup>2</sup>

When Connecticut Voices for Children studied the impact of school resource officers in Connecticut, they found that “schools with SROs are not measurably safer than schools without SROs, and they may have more punitive climates than schools without SROs.”<sup>3</sup> “[T]he presence of SROs in schools

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/national-guidelines-for-behavioral-health-crisis-care-02242020.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/national-guidelines-for-behavioral-health-crisis-care-02242020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ctvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SRO-Just-Facts-FINAL.pdf>

is associated with a significant increase in the risk of students experiencing exclusionary discipline.”<sup>4</sup> Further, “the risk of referral to law enforcement in schools with SROs was over three times higher for Black and Latino/a/x students in schools with SROs.”<sup>5</sup>

The findings by Connecticut Voices echo findings of OCA’s investigation into one urban district’s use of law enforcement in response to crisis behavior in schools. In September, 2020, the OCA published an investigative report regarding Waterbury schools’ utilization of police in response to the crisis behavior of children in Preschool through Grade 8 schools. OCA found that the district called police almost 200 times in a six-month period of time during the 2018-19 school year, resulting in 36 arrests of students, including nine students age 11 and under. OCA found that children as young as 7, 8, and 9 years old were subject to a police response after exhibiting dysregulated and suicidal or self-harming behavior, with some children even handcuffed during these encounters.<sup>6</sup> OCA’s review of the local police reports noted at least 40 incidents where children, often under ten years of age, spoke of dying or tried to harm themselves in school. **None of the schools had a dedicated social worker or counselor in the building.** While that district has worked to improve resources and supports for young children, we know that children across the state need us to invest in them and their well-being.

We note that the bill would require “that individuals who are school counselors, social workers, psychologists, aides or other staff members and have appropriate training and ongoing supports may be assigned the duties of a school resource officer.” This speaks to the need to have trained and skilled individuals available to respond when a child is in crisis. It is critically important to make investments to ensure schools are adequately staffed to meet the current and emerging needs of students. Schools need social workers, psychologists, behavioral specialists, and other people skilled in children’s mental and behavioral health to respond when crises occur, develop plans and support staff to prevent behavioral escalations and avoid the need for crisis response, and help connect families with needed resources. In addition to that, all of the things that we want to be able to do for our children and teachers -- allow them to develop positive relationships, receive individualized attention and support, address remedial education needs, promote student wellness and mental health, reduce suspension and expulsion, promote positive school climate -- will take meaningful and sustained investment in schools that allows them to reduce class sizes, retain highly qualified personnel, address student mental health needs, and ensure staffing supports that promote educational equity and student and teacher wellbeing. As long as there are children struggling in schools with large class sizes, few support resources, and educators and administrators stretched to the breaking point, we will not be able to address children’s wellness and mental health.

Lastly, we do have some concern about the existing statutory language regarding the memorandum of understanding. The current law requires that the memorandum include “a graduated response model for student discipline.” While we agree with graduated responses to student discipline, we think the role of the school resource officer should be further clarified. Generally, school discipline is, and should be, the responsibility of educators and school administration. Involving school resources officers in school discipline blurs the lines as to who is responsible for maintaining the learning environment. That is and should remain the responsibility of school administrators, in consultation with teachers, school psychologists and school social workers.

OCA would also recommend that to the extent school resources are utilized, that schools be required to collect data regarding sanctions arising from school resource officer actions or encounters with

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> OCA’s report is available on the web at: <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/OCA/OCA-Recent-Publications/OCA-Report--Final-Waterbury-Report-September-1-2020.pdf>.

students and include: the nature of the student's behavior, the age/race/ethnicity/gender of the student, and whether the student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP).